MEDIA

Taylor Lorenz leaves 'Washington Post' after rift with editors

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David Folkenflik

Taylor Lorenz, shown above in February in Los Angeles at a Galentine's Day brunch thrown by a Los Angeles online influencer.
Emma McIntyre/Getty Images for TheRetaility.com

When tech columnist Taylor Lorenz left the *Washington Post* last week, she did so with a splash: An interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* about launching her own digital magazine, called User Mag.

"I like to have a really interactive relationship with my audience," she said. "I like to be very vocal online, obviously. And I just think all of that is really hard to do in the roles that are available at these legacy institutions."

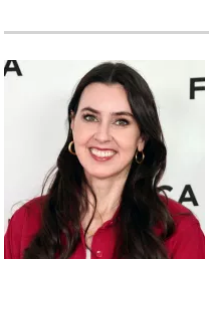
Lorenz's professional fate at the paper was in doubt even prior to her announcement. Since August, its editors had grappled with the disclosure that Lorenz had labeled President Biden a "war criminal" in a selfie from a White House event in which Biden was visible in the background. She had circulated the picture to friends in a private social media post.

Lorenz, a frequent and often divisive presence online, never wrote for the paper again.

Three people at the *Post* with knowledge of events tell NPR that Lorenz lost the trust of the newsroom's leadership both by posting that selfie with the caption about Biden and then by willfully misleading editors in claiming that she had not done so.

Lorenz initially denied writing the caption or sharing it. After Jon Levine of *The New York Post* posted a screengrab of it online, Lorenz tweeted, "You people will fall for any dumbass edit someone makes." She told editors that someone else had added the caption to the photo.

After NPR verified the post was authentic, Lorenz changed her account of what happened, acknowledging to editors she had shared the image.



BUSINESS

'Washington Post' reviews star columnist Taylor Lorenz's 'war criminal' jab at Biden

The *Post* kicked off a formal review, saying, "Our executive editor and senior editors take alleged violations of our standards seriously." Lorenz maintained she shared the image as a joke echoing an online meme, not as a commentary on Biden.

The paper has not announced the findings of its review. "We are grateful for the work Taylor has produced at *The Washington Post*," a corporate spokesperson said in a statement. "She has resigned to pursue a career in independent journalism, and we wish her the best." The paper would not comment further.

"I have no idea about their review," Lorenz writes in a text to NPR. "All I know is that they've been incredibly cool to me and very great, and I'm on good terms with them.

"I want out of legacy media as a whole, for so many reasons," Lorenz writes to NPR. "And that's not a knock on legacy media, I love and support all of my friends in that system, but it's not the right environment for me to do the work that I want to do."

Lorenz felt increasingly at home among influencers

In her new magazine, she writes more bluntly. "[I]t's increasingly difficult to communicate the urgency or importance of certain stories to bosses who have zero understanding of the world I cover," she writes.

Lorenz is unquestionably a star among those who cover digital media and considers herself "extremely online," which is also the title of her 2023 book about online influence. She has plumbed the world of social media influencers and found a sense of community among them.

For months preceding the Biden incident, her bio on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) cited her prior Substack blog and her podcast for Vox Media, but not the *Post* itself. It now links to User Mag as well as the podcast.

At the Democratic National Convention in August, she acquired credentials to attend as a content creator, not as a reporter for the *Post*. She had mused to associates about leaving the paper after the November elections for an independent career. She tells NPR that she had several offers this month that she "didn't want to say no" and that she had been advised not to launch in November right before the holidays.

Even so, according to counterparts and colleagues who have known her at various points in her career, Lorenz has until now placed great stock in her affiliation with major mainstream news outlets. She reported for *The Atlantic* magazine and *The New York Times* before joining the *Post*. Yet she has consistently tangled online with critics in a way that tested the social media policies of those outlets. Both newspapers have struggled with policies seeking to regulate their journalists' social media postings on contentious issues.

At the *Post*, Lorenz was designated a columnist, giving her more leeway for personal expression in print and on her own accounts than a reporter would have. Even so, her work for the newspaper focused on reported articles rather than opinion pieces.

A well-sourced reporter with a fiery online presence

Other journalists at the *Post* describe her to NPR as a collegial, collaborative and richly sourced reporter in the world of tech executives, content producers and influencers.

Yet they say she could be unyielding, whether scrapping online or defending her own work.

Lorenz fired off repeated tweets that blamed her editor for inserting mistakes into a story in 2022 and argued she was the victim of a "bad faith" campaign against her and the paper. *Post* media columnist Erik Wemple wrote that the paper had given her the green light to say the editor had been at fault, but questioned whether that was the fair thing to do.

Lorenz engaged in a similar defense of her "war criminal" post on Instagram about Biden, insisting that it was an inside joke, not an ideological declaration. Others not as conversant with the ways of digital influencers did not comprehend the meme, she suggested.

On Wednesday, in an interview with the *New Yorker* about her new Substack publication, Lorenz said, "What I'll say, on the record, is every single President that I've ever seen in my lifetime is a war criminal."

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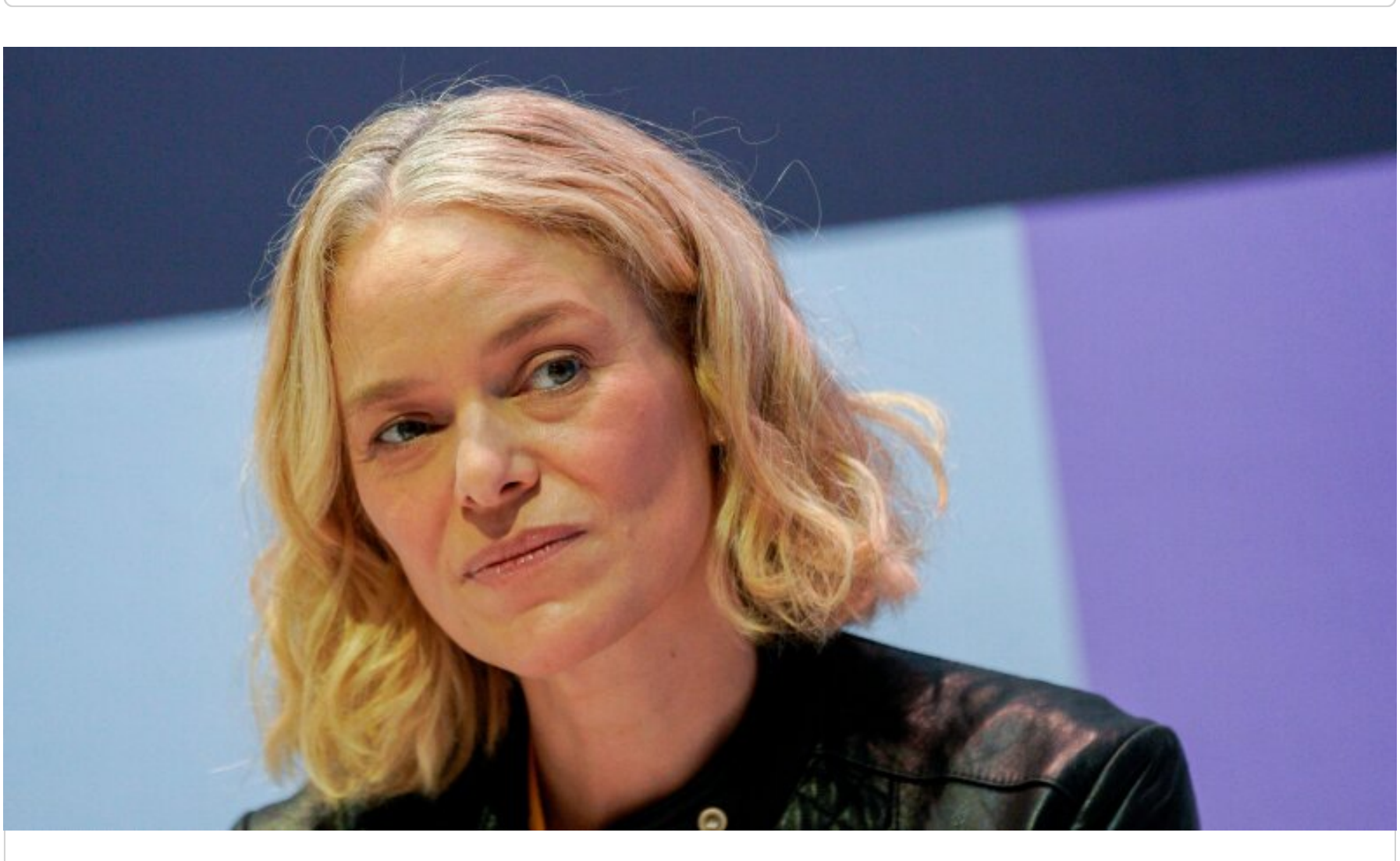

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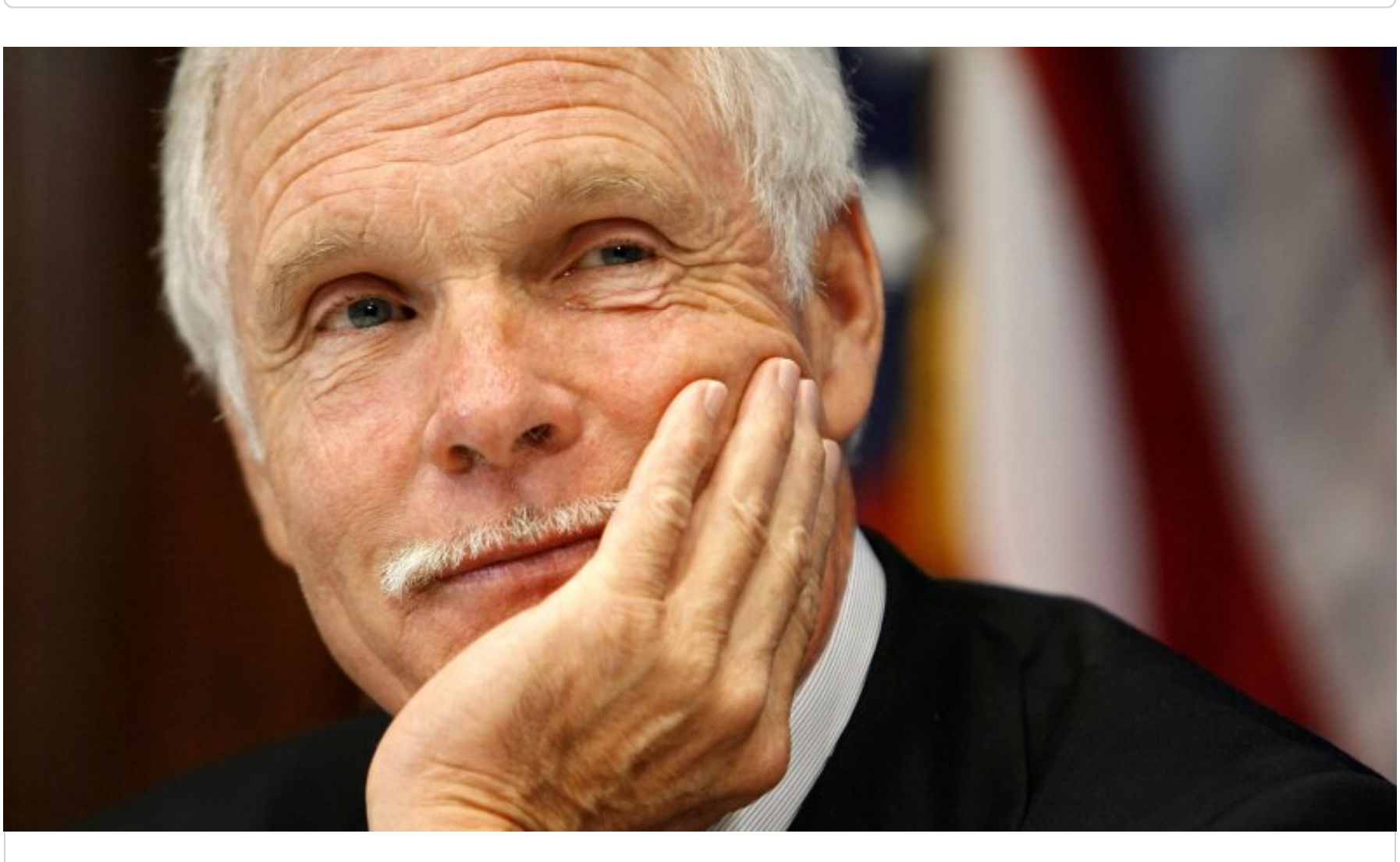

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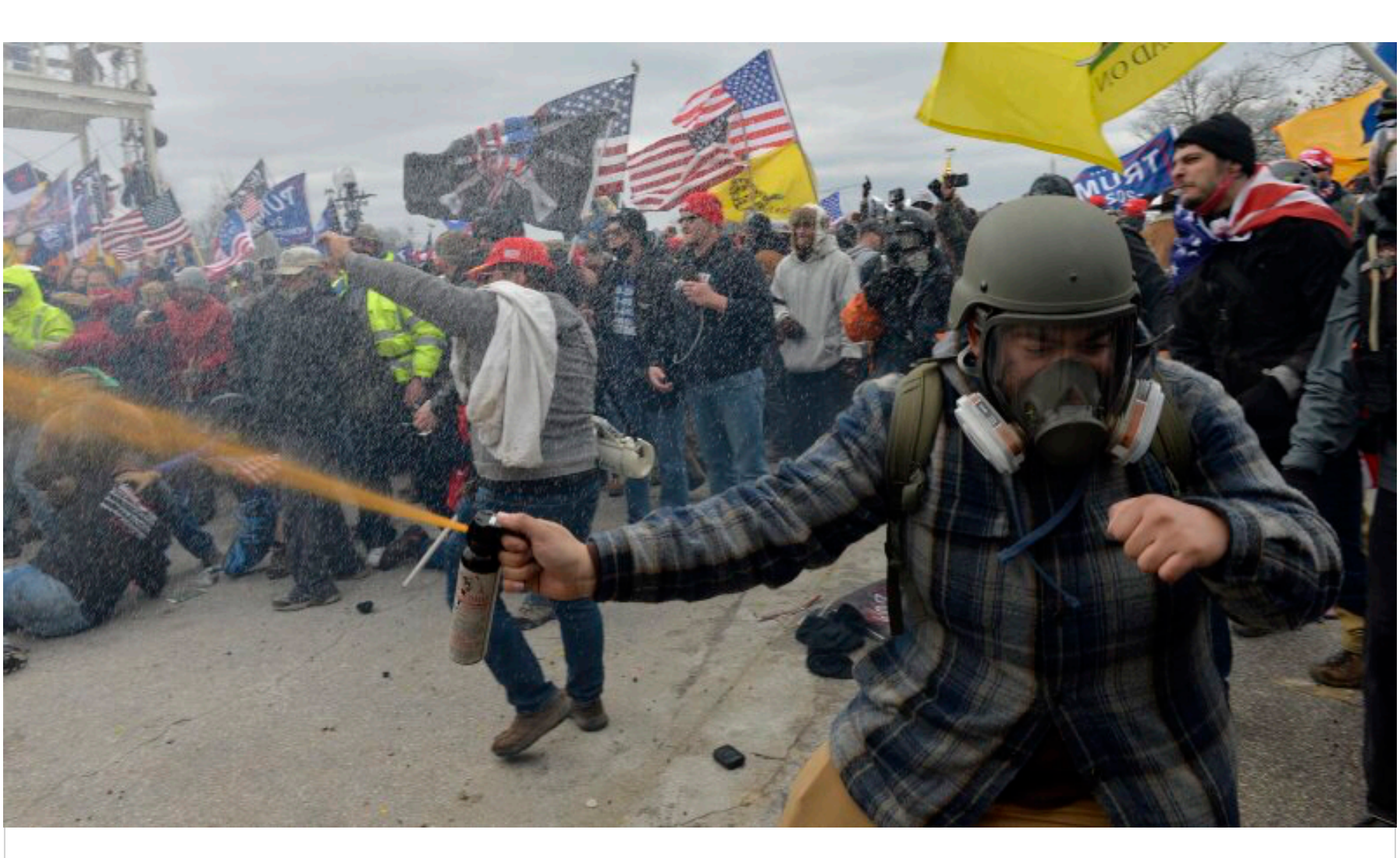

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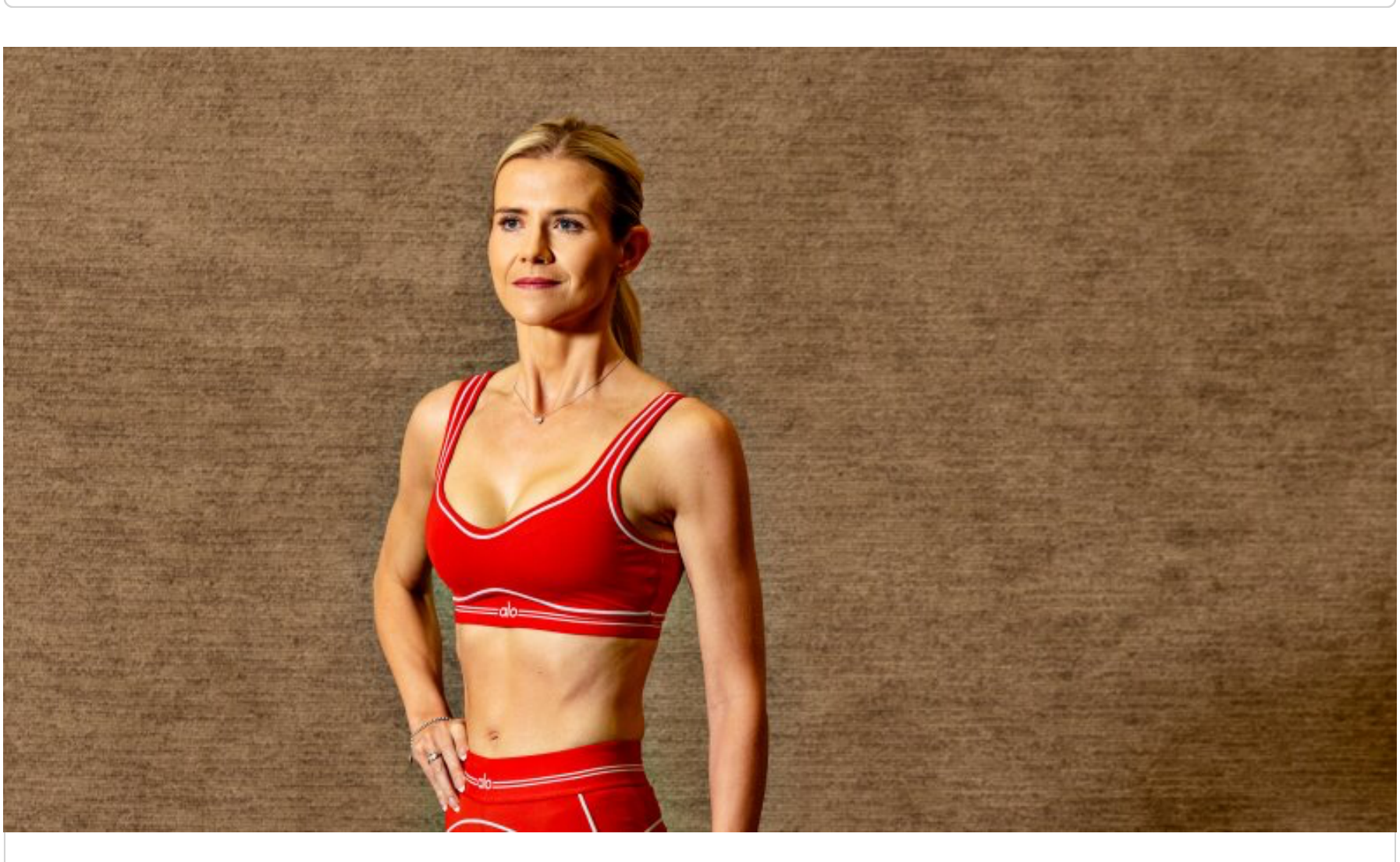

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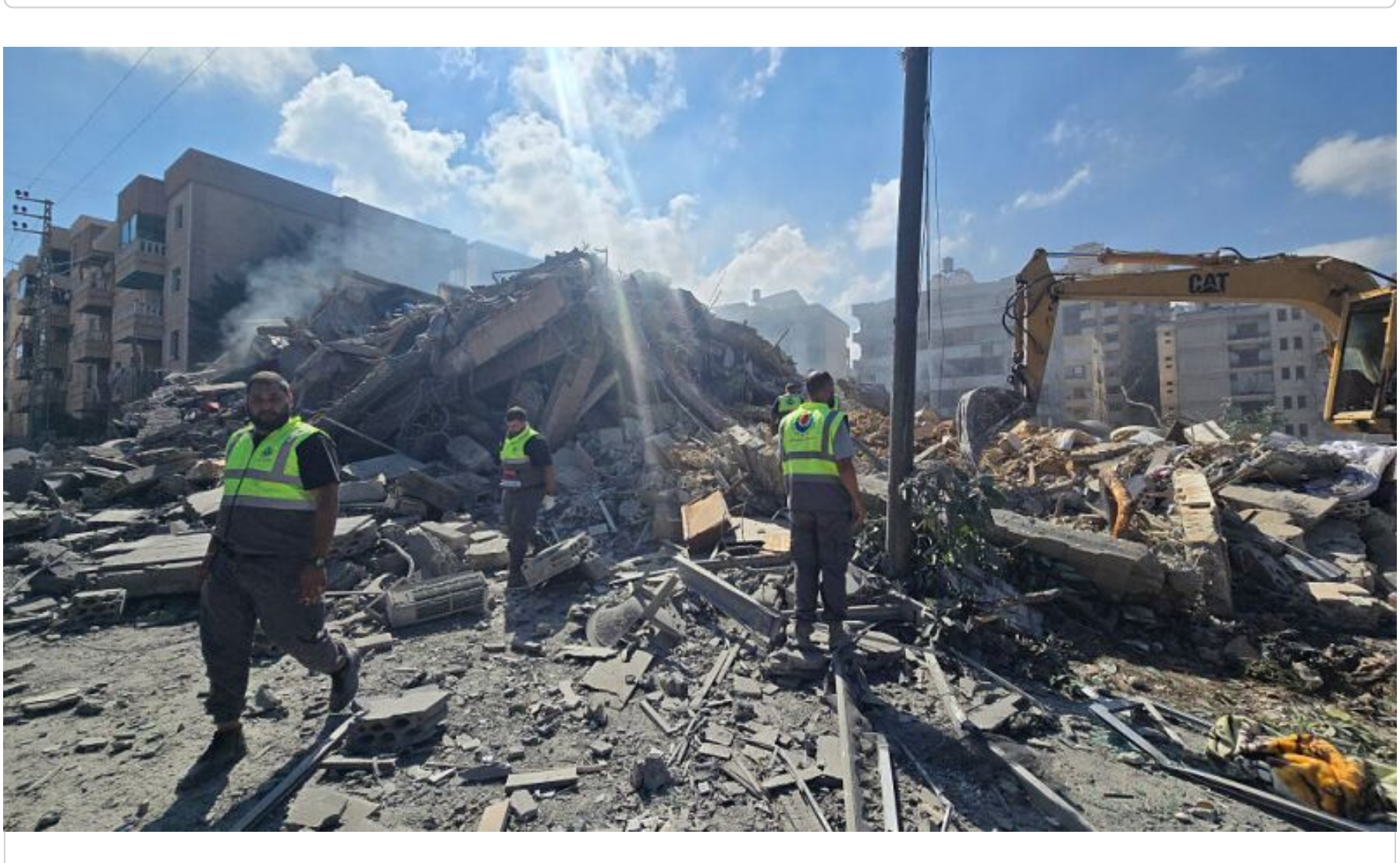

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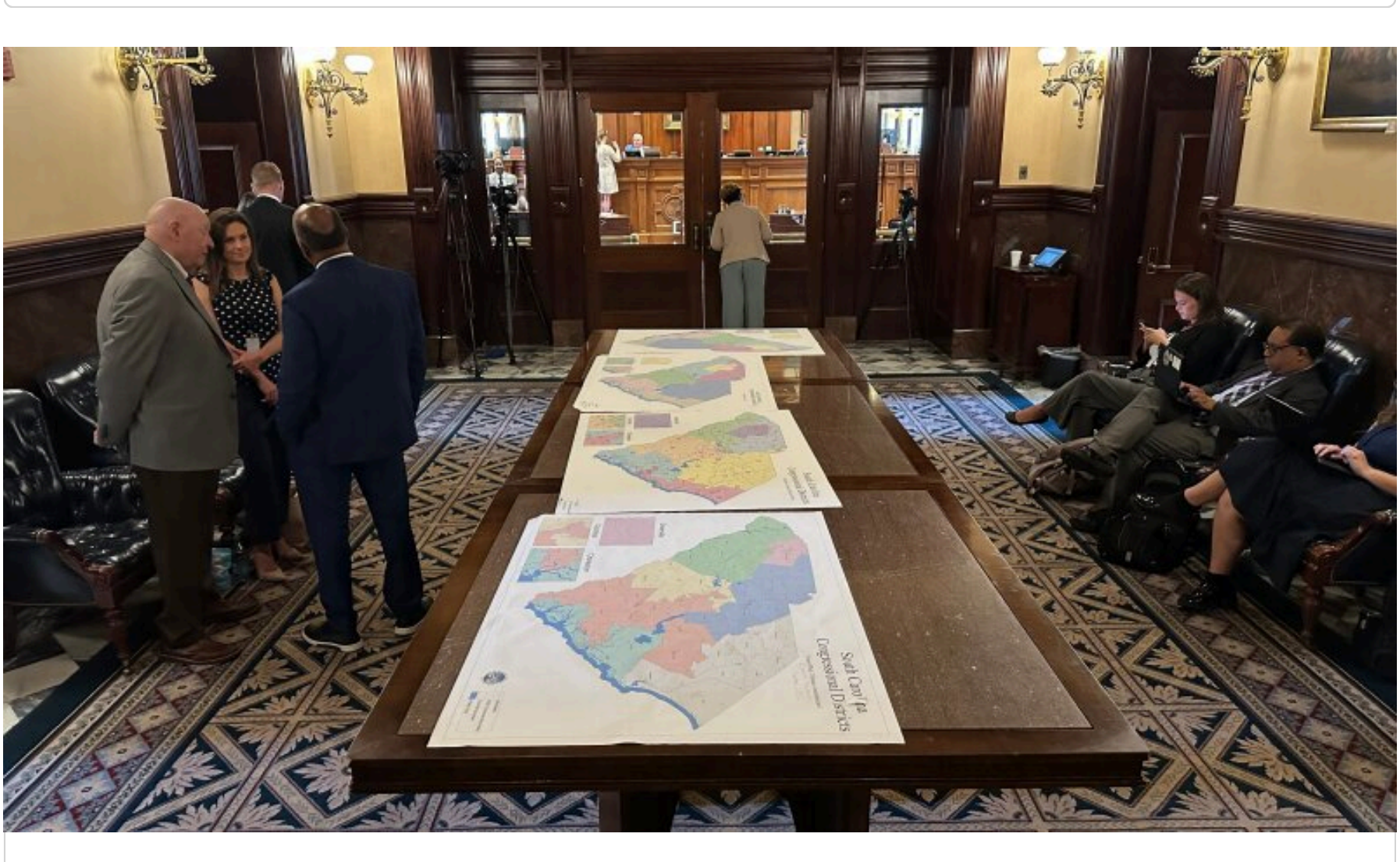

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